

WordBytes

Why Melchizedek?

Melchizedek, is often regarded as a “mysterious” figure in the Scriptures. This WordByte explains who he was and how he plays a key role in revealing Jesus as our great High Priest, and also debunks some common misconceptions.

Who Was He?

Genesis 14:18 tells us that he was king of Salem and priest of God Most High:

“Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was the priest of God Most High”

Salem was a Canaanite city traditionally identified as the early name of Jerusalem at the time of Abraham. Supporting evidence includes:

“In Judah God is known; His name is great in Israel. In Salem also is His tabernacle, And His dwelling place in Zion”. (Psalm 86:1-2)

Flavius Josephus’ Antiquities of the Jews — Book I Chapter 10:2:

“Now the King of Sodom met him at a certain place, which they called The King’s dale, where Melchizedek, King of the city Salem, received him.... However, they afterward called Salem Jerusalem”.

Melchizedek is the only priest of God named in the Bible before the Levitical priesthood was established when Aaron was chosen by God at mount Sinai in Exodus 28. Other pre-Levitical priests were mentioned in Exodus 19:22 as being present among the Israelites who arrived at Mt Sinai, but no details are given as to who they were, when and how they were appointed, and what their duties had been during Israel’s time in Egypt.

In Genesis 18, Jethro, “the priest of Midian”, Moses’ father-in-law, acknowledged “the LORD is greater than all gods” for His deliverance of Israel from Egypt and sacrificed to Him. However, he did not declare the Lord to be the only true God and was never called a priest of God in the Scriptures.

Why is Melchizedek Important?

In Psalm 110:4 David prophesied that the coming Messiah would be a Priest as well as a King, and His priesthood would be in the likeness of Melchizedek:

“The Lord has sworn and will not relent, ‘You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek’”.

Thus, Melchizedek is a type of Jesus in His role as Priest as confirmed in Hebrews 7:15:

“And it is yet far more evident if, in the likeness of Melchizedek, there arises another priest.....”

and in His role as King in verse 7:1-2:

“Melchizedek....first being translated ; king of righteousness; and then also king of Salem, meaning ‘king of peace.’”

Why Is the Melchizedek Priesthood Greater than Levitical Priesthood?

- As shown above, Melchizedek was a king as well as a priest, whereas the roles of king and priest were separated in the Levitical priesthood.

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- Hebrews 7:3 reveals that Melchizedek's priesthood was not based on genealogy, i.e. not on who his father or mother were, which is likely the reason why their identities are not given. In contrast a Levitical priest had to be a descendent of Aaron.
- Hebrews 7:3 also states that Melchizedek had "neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God, remains a priest continually", whereas the service of a Levitical priest was limited by the dates of his appointment and death. The scriptures are speaking allegorically here about Melchizedek appearing abruptly and disappearing from the scene without explanation, whereas the biblical norm is to record genealogy and lifespan.
- Hebrews 7:9 states that when Melchizedek received a tenth of the spoils from Abraham and blessed him, in a sense he also received it from Levi, Abraham's descendant. The one who receives the tenth and blesses the giver is always the greater, so the Melchizedek priesthood must be greater than the Levitical priesthood.

Superiority of Jesus' Priesthood

Because the Melchizedek priesthood is greater than the Levitical priesthood, Jesus' priesthood must also be greater, as Melchizedek is a type of Jesus.

His superiority and greatness is revealed in Hebrews 7 and 8:

- He is a priest forever.
- God appointed Him with an oath.
- Levitical priests had weakness, but He is the Son of God who has been perfected forever.
- The Levitical priests had to continually offer sacrifices for themselves and for the people, but He offered up Himself once and for all.
- He has annulled the law of commandments which made nothing perfect.
- He is the Mediator of a better covenant, established on better promises.
- He is able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.
- We are able to draw near to God through Him.

This was a particularly important issue for the Hebrew believers who had been taught that the Levitical high priest of the day was their spiritual head and God's appointed representative.

Not a Model for Tithing

Reasons why Abraham's encounter with Melchizedek cannot be used as a model for tithing include:

- The writer of Hebrews only uses Abraham tithing to Melchizedek to prove the superiority of the Melchizedek priesthood over the Levitical priesthood, and not as a model for tithing under the Old or New Covenants.
- Abraham only gave a tenth of the spoils of his recent battle; there is no record in the Scriptures that he regularly tithed from his own resources.
- It was a common practice of the time for local kings/priests to receive a portion of the spoils of battle.

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- Abraham actually gave away 100% of the spoils – the other 90% was given to the King of Sodom except for the portion for the men who went with him and the provisions already eaten by the young men.
- The spoils of battle included people, clothing and other goods, whereas Old Covenant tithing was limited to agricultural crops and animals.
- Under the Old Covenant, the law covering the spoils of battle was separate from tithing. Also, as revealed in Numbers 31:25-31, only 1% of the spoils was given to the Levites and 0.1% to the priests.

Not a Model for The Lord's Supper

Genesis 14:18 tells us that:

"Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was the priest of God Most High. And he blessed him and said 'Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand.'"

Reasons why this cannot be used as a type of the Lord's Supper under the New Covenant include:

- Melchizedek is not presented anywhere in the Scriptures as a type of Jesus in His role as Saviour.
- The Lord's Supper celebrated the victory of Jesus, whereas Melchizedek played no part in Abraham's victorious battle.
- There is no reference in the Scriptures to the bread and wine supplied by Melchizedek being a type of the body and blood of Jesus or indeed of anything else.

The straightforward understanding of the Scripture is that Melchizedek supplied much needed sustenance from Salem for Abraham and his men returning from battle. This is supported in Flavius Josephus' Antiquities of the Jews - Book I Chapter 10:2:

"Now this Melchizedek supplied Abram's army in an hospitable manner, and gave them provisions in abundance"

Not an Old Testament Appearance of Jesus

Hebrews 7:15 reveals that Melchizedek was only a type of Jesus in His role as Priest:

"And it is yet far more evident if, in the likeness of Melchizedek, there arises another priest....."

It in no way implies that he was actually Jesus Himself as is sometimes taught. This is clear as the text refers to Jesus as "another" priest.

Similarly, Deuteronomy 18:15 tells us that Moses was a type of Jesus, but this doesn't imply that he was Jesus:

"The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your midst, from your brethren. Him you shall hear"

Other reasons include:

- Melchizedek evidently lived in the city of Salem as king and priest, whereas there is no indication from the Scriptures that Jesus actually spent time living on Earth in human form prior to being born in Bethlehem. All Old Testament appearances of God generally attributed to Jesus, such as to Abraham in Genesis 18, were of short duration.



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- It is inconceivable that Jesus would occupy the role of king and priest of a single Canaanite city.
- It is inconceivable that Jesus would receive a tithe of the spoils of battle which included people.

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